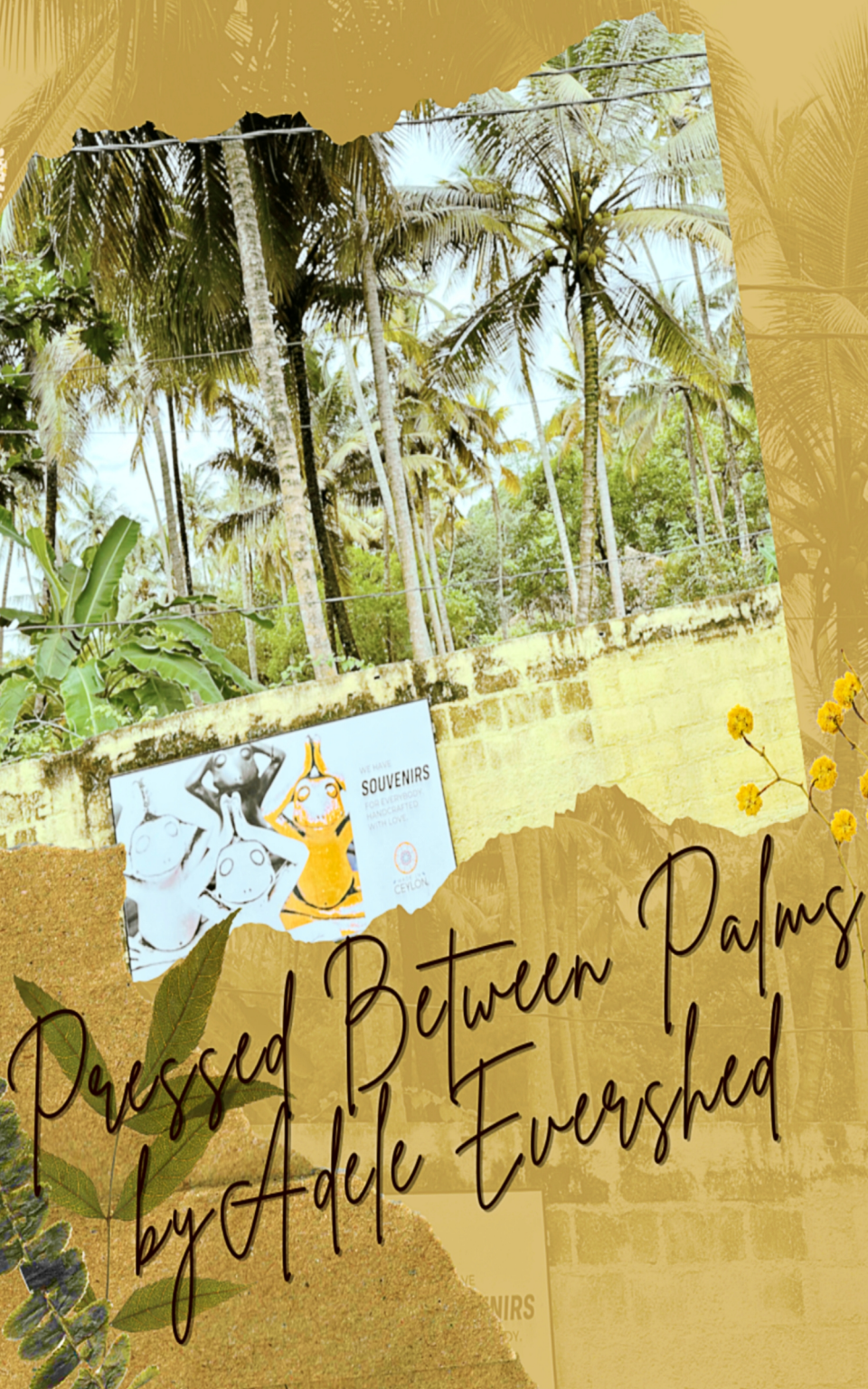

Pressed Between Palms

by Adele Evershed

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Pressed Between Palms

A Haiku Sojourn Through Southern Sri Lanka

Adele Evershed

Introduction

When my friend invited me to join her on a birthday holiday in Sri Lanka, I hesitated. It was far away, and I knew almost nothing about the teardrop-shaped island off India's left cheek, except that it used to be called Ceylon, a small jewel in the British Empire's crown.

Brits of a certain age have a complicated relationship with our country's past. In every classroom in 1970s Britain, a world map hung on the wall, all our conquests painted pink. Pink seems an odd choice now —associated with the feminine, softness, gentleness— and if you know anything about empire building you will know those qualities are rarely evident.

After her excitement rubbed off on me, I didn't reach for *The Rough Guide* but for poetry. That's when I found Indran Amirthanayagam's poem, "Words for the Sri Lanka Tourist Office." It offered a poignant critique of the commodification of Sri Lanka's beauty and culture, set against its painful history of violence and loss. The way it confronted the tourist gaze while gesturing toward the island's bloody past mirrored my own misgivings about visiting a place my country had once harmed.

I spent two unforgettable weeks in southern Sri Lanka: flying kites at Galle Face, chasing elusive leopards on safari, watching stilt fishermen bring in their catch, and admiring colonial architecture. But I also sought out the “other Sri Lanka” Amirthanayagam’s poem had urged me to see. Everywhere I looked, I found inspiration, and I wrote more haiku in those weeks than I ever had in a comparable stretch of time.

I returned home with over a hundred ku and realized they were a better record of my time away than all the photographs I had taken. Writing these haiku made me look beneath the surface—not only of Sri Lanka, but of myself.

"But if you want to swim at Mount Lavinia,
or fly kites on Galle Face Green… just remember
here everywhere… the dead have tongues…
floating out of salt water… the dead have ears."

— **Indran Amirthanayagam**,
an extract from the poem
'Words for the Sri Lanka Tourist Office'

teardrop island…
pressed between palms
I find poetry

I.

ARRIVALS & DISTANCES

"We travel, some of us forever, to seek other states, other lives, other souls."

— Anaïs Nin

abu dhabi stop-over –
the sheik's hotel portrait
a spit of omar sharif

early morning prayers –
next to the grand mosque
starbucks

grand mosque gift shop
buying a prayer mat
I'll never use

souk shopping –
spices, abayas
and the hum of air-con

infinity pool
at the edge I meet
the blue hippo

leaving columbo –
even the moonlight
feels foreign here

waning moon
other side of the ocean
the same headlines

tuk-tuk journey
the air laced with frangipani
and fear

sri lankan home stay –
the maid and I share a sing-song
accent

irreversible binomial
me and the maid

arak attack
my husband forgets
how to walk

porn star martini –
banana and passion fruit
an old man's joke

II.

HOUSEHOLD GODS & OTHER MEN

"Comfort is not a neutral space."

— bell hooks

morning silence –
broken by the bread man
playing greensleeves

salty lassi
behind his back
the maid rolls her eyes

jaggery –
the soft crumble
of a street child's smile

malla leaves falling –
the gardener waves his broom
at the monkeys

power cut –
a black dragonfly
drifts into shadow

elevenses
the maid serves us
conconuts

water lilies open
in the stone basin –
morning shower

poya festival
the sarong vendor
spins a yard

roadside stall –
a woman sells mangosteens
and her life story

buddhist temple
the guard asks for donations
for himself

ocean view
between the conconut trees
a washing line

midday heat –
the mongoose and I
the only ones around

white tea –
the gardener still sweeping
the same dust

cassava crisps
a chili-spiced after taste
of old tongues

curd and treacle –
a new café built
before breakfast

happy hour
a nightjar calls
my bluff

tamarind margarita –
the taste of sunset
rimmed with regret

mosquito coil…
the slow unfurling
of a fist

III.

WILD ANIMALS & OTHER WILDLIFE

"The white tourist can remain at a distance…
he can be content with the surface of things."

— Jamaica Kincaid, *'A Small Place'*

coconut grove –
greeted by lotus flowers
and wifi password

lion ice beer –
a slice of lime
for the tourists

pool-side
the monkeys watch us
drinking from coconuts

stilt fishermen –
a fine balance
between show and tell

leopard safari –
the english tourist
can't change his spots

outdoor bathroom –
the only peeping tom
Raja the monkey…

yala national park
the leopard yawns
into ten cameras

elephant rock –
a circling ant trail
of tourist jeeps

new swimming pool –
the frog jumps in
tourists scream…

crocodile spotting
him and me
open mouthed

butterfly safari
a ceylon rose
stuck on the windscreen

painted stork –
no way to tell
by looking

temple steps –
I stumble over
the guide's name

beach vendor
selling wooden elephants
and condoms

local antique shop
opium pots
mass produced

tea plantation tour –
the women always bending
lower than the men

IV.

MYTH & MEMORY

"Myth is what happens to a story when it survives."

— Terry Pratchett

galle museum –
batik, buddhism
with a smattering of blood

mango sun –
I tell my husband
the story of Hanuman

wild ginger blossoms –
learning to speak names
I know from travel books

banana flower
every petal revealing
a stolen name

nikini full moon –
spooning coconut sambal
onto my breakfast

egg hopper –
learning new names
for things I thought I knew

bitter gourd sambal –
he says I could use
more spice in my life

durian –
he tries to convince me
it tastes like chicken

cinnamon wind
my skin lightly toasted
in red dust

incense smoke –
the street dog curled
beneath the Buddha

roadside shrine
the abandoned corpses
of coconut shells

off the beaten track
a banyan tree tangled
with fishing nets

coastal wall
etched with a watermark
and blessings for the dead

fort walls
in the rusted cannon
a myna bird's nest

frog rock –
local boys still jumping
for white men's coins

snake gourd –
the postcard vendor asks
for reparations

night breeze –
the sudden wheeze
of the security guard's cough

summer dawn –
a chorus of birds
in my back

V.

GHOSTS OF WAR

"All wars are fought twice, the first time
on the battlefield, the second time in memory."

— Viet Thanh Nguyen

ceylon sunset
the scent of decay
in the planter's chair

old expat

serves me tea

in an I ♥ Ceylon mug

the old colonial hotel
given a makeover
in name only…

clock tower –
the kite seller
missing a hand

old checkpoint…
bougainvillea
filling the bullet holes

bamboo fence –
through the gap
fearful things

half-built villa –
a monitor lizard's tale
imprinted in cement

thunder beach
a monkey scampers past
on a chain

blood blister –
trying to ignore the rub
of my ancestors

pepper plant –
on the tip of my tongue
a denial

tuk-tuk driver –
pulling his sleeve to hide
a tiger tattoo

galle fort –
the sounds of battle
between street dogs

mother's lullaby –
she leaves out
the line about the war

rice paddies
the flutter of new shoots
in the island's flag

elephant graveyard –
the bleach of time
on mother's memory

VI.

RETURNS & REFLECTIONS

"The past is not dead. It is not even past."

— William Faulkner

green bananas
not quite ready
to go home

packing my suitcase
my discarded shoes –
now a gecko's home

leopard rock –
the warning call
of a peacock

koel's call
the sudden squeak
of a sliding door

monsoon season –
something inside me
always dry

JFK airport –
my phone displaying
colombo rain

island light –
so many shadows
left behind

fall dusk –
my coconut bowl
full of nostalgia

customs form –
unable to list
everything I took

weekly shop –
baked beans and rice flour
in my basket

holiday yarns
a thin white thread on my wrist
slowly greying

back in my garden
a black dragonfly
flutters out of shadow

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the editors of the following magazines and journals in which these poems or earlier versions of them first appeared:

- **Failed Haiku**: *grand mosque*
- **Femku**: *tea plantation*
- **Haiku Dialogue**: *infinity pool*
- **Haiku Shack**: *malla leaves, ocean view, off the beaten track*
- **Poetry Pea**: *happy hour*
- **Presence**: *old check point*
- **Heterodox Haiku Journal Contrarians**: *banana flower*

Check out these other Nun Prophet titles!

BREVITY – Noah Berlatsky

CARAVAN – Melissa Dennison

DELTA LENSCAPES – Jianqing Zheng

FIRST DAY OF THE REST – Chin & Hough

FOUR HORSE PARABLE – John Hawkhead

FURY OF MY FART – Adjei Agyei-Baah

HUSHPUPPY – Kelly Moyer

MANSIONS OF THE MOON – Kathy Watts

THE MASK OF MATSUSHIMA – Tim Gardiner

MOTHER POMEGRANATE – Kelly Moyer

POURING LIGHT ON THE HILLS – Chin & Onyedikam

RAISING EYEBROWS – Susan Burch

RICE AND BEANS – Jerome Berglund

ROSE PERIWINKLES – Vipanjeet Kaur

VARIATIONS ON THE PLANETS – Ettinger & Gilbert

WAITING FOR AN ORACLE – petro c.k.

Also by Adele Evershed

THE BRINK OF SILENCE
SUFFER/RAGE
TURBULENCE IN SMALL PLACES
WANNABE

Adele Evershed *was born in South Wales and has lived in Hong Kong and Singapore before settling in Connecticut. Her prose and poetry have been published in over a hundred journals and anthologies such as Wales Haiku Journal, Prune Juice, Modern Haiku, Shot Glass Journal, and Hole in the Head Review. Adele has recently been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net for poetry, and the Staunch Prize for flash fiction. Finishing Line Press published her poetry chapbook,* Turbulence in Small Places, *and her novella-in-flash,* Wannabe, *was published by Alien Buddha Press.*

This collection is as if Matsuo Bashō's frog jumped into a tourist's scream. It's a phone call away displaying Colombo rain, and a soft crumble of a street child's smile changing to sunsets rimmed with regret while stilt fishermen and blue hippos live amongst bougainvillea that fill bullet holes. The thin white thread on a wrist slowly unravels a powerful work of haiku around the real Sri Lanka.

Alan Summers, founder *Call of the Page*,
and editor *The Pan Haiku Review*

Pressed Between Palms *is a vivid act of witnessing. With openness and unhurried attention, Adele Evershed gathers the textures of southern Sri Lanka: monsoon heat, spice markets, temple smoke, monkeys on rooftops, and the quiet shadows of history that linger beneath the surface. Woven alongside these moments are the modern and memorable: a coffee chain beside a grand mosque, a souvenir bought more for its story than its use, women labouring on tea slopes while tourists pause to watch, revealing the complexities that travel can reveal. These haiku are steeped in lived experience rather than postcard gloss; the poet does not just observe, she listens. Accessible and attentive, the book holds both wonder and nuance, revealing a place that is layered, complex, and alive. Each poem becomes a moment pressed to the page like a leaf, carrying the scent of the island long after the last line.*

C.X. Turner, co-editor
Wales Haiku Journal

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